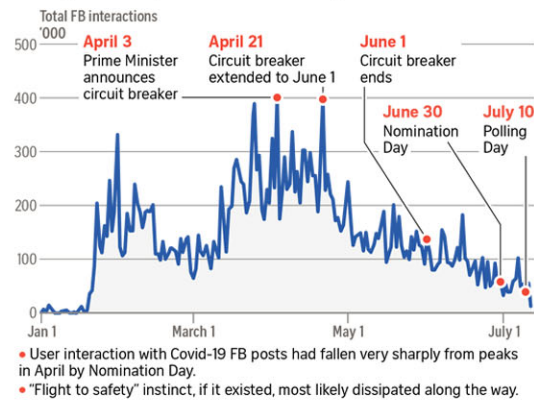


Missed signals

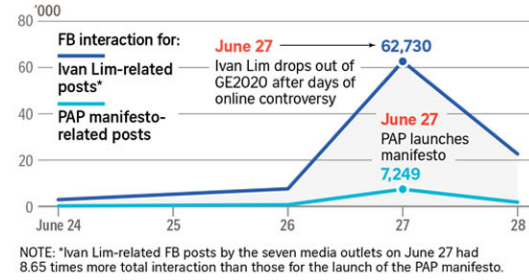
1 COVID-19 DESENSITISATION

Despite the large number of Facebook (FB) posts, there were signs that the parties missed broader signals on social media.



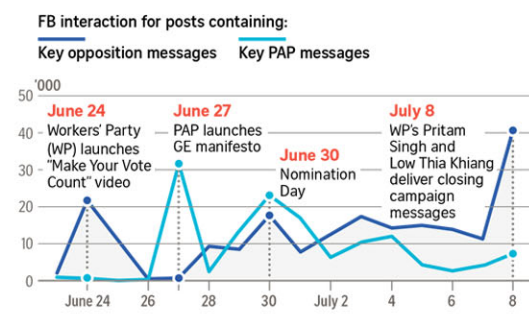
2 IVAN LIM INCIDENT

The controversy over the former People's Action Party (PAP) candidate was the first major sign that the party's core message on jobs may not have resonated with voters in a big way.



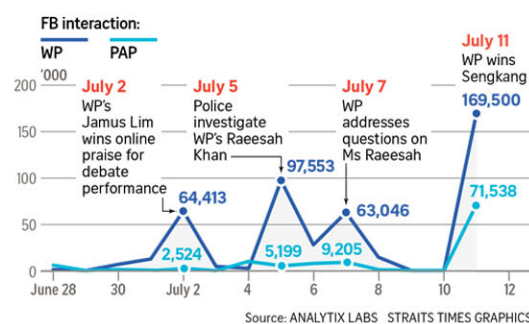
3 THE 'ENTHUSIASM GAP'

User interaction with FB posts related to PAP's jobs-focused messages peaked well before Polling Day, while that for the opposition - to deny the PAP "a blank cheque" - peaked just in time.



4 THE 'SENGKANG SURPRISE'

Signs pointed to a gap in mindshare between the PAP and WP teams.



Social media signals not heeded: Analyst

Several outcomes of this year's general election, such as the loss of Sengkang GRC to the Workers' Party (WP) and overall swing towards the opposition, could have been less surprising if political parties had paid greater attention to warning signals from social media data, said Mr Chua Chin Hon, chief data analyst at AI solutions company Analytix Labs.

He said the major parties - People's Action Party (PAP), WP, Progress Singapore Party and Singapore Democratic Party - treated social media mainly as distribution channels for their messages. This "fire-and-forget" approach will prove increasingly costly in future elections, he said.

Speaking at an online forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies yesterday, he said there were four "missed signals" before Polling Day:

1. COVID-19 DESENSITISATION

By Nomination Day on June 30, user interactions with Covid-19 Facebook (FB) posts had plunged from their peak in April. "The 'flight to safety' instinct, if it existed, likely dissipated along the way," Mr Chua said about the belief that voters would be more inclined to support incumbents in a crisis.

2. IVAN LIM INCIDENT

PAP candidate Ivan Lim, 42, who had been walking the ground in Jurong GRC and was expected to be fielded there, withdrew his candidacy after allegations were made about his conduct at work and as a national service commander.

News of his withdrawal blew up on June 27, the day the PAP manifesto was launched. That day, FB posts on him at seven local media outlets had 62,730 user interactions, almost nine times more than those for the launch of the manifesto.

The outlets were: The Straits Times, Channel News Asia, Today, Mothership, Lianhe Zhabao, Lianhe Wanbao and Shin Min Daily News. "Some say online users are always going to be drawn to drama and controversy," said Mr Chua. "These are fair points. But when you have an interaction gap of this size, it should have rung some alarm bells."

3. ENTHUSIASM GAP

User interaction with FB posts on the PAP's key message on jobs peaked well before Polling Day, while the opposition's message to deny the PAP a "blank cheque" peaked just in time, Mr Chua said.

The final fillip came in the form of emotive video appeals from former and current WP chiefs Low Thia Khiong and Pritam Singh to Singaporeans to "make their vote count".

"In contrast, the PAP didn't close its campaign on a particularly strong or memorable note. It might have been even lower if not for PM's Fullerton Rally," Mr Chua said.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's lunchtime e-rally on July 6 was streamed live on FB and YouTube. The PAP started the Fullerton Rally in 1959 to reach out to workers.

"In the context of United States politics, parties always try to close their campaigns on an emotional high," said Mr Chua. While Singapore politics is not stage-managed to that extent, he added, it could be worth considering in the future.

4. SENGKANG SURPRISE

In a sample of 325 FB posts analysed for the Sengkang GRC contest, the WP team had about 32,700 FB interactions daily during the campaign; the PAP team had about 4,200.

Mr Chua noted that not all who reacted to the WP's posts were necessarily Sengkang voters, or even Singaporeans - as there are no publicly available tools to parse FB interaction data by region. "But when the gap is this big, there is no doubt the WP team garnered far greater mindshare."

He concluded the parties are still "scratching the surface" of what modern electoral campaigns do in terms of data analysis and social media targeting.

Having multiple back-up plans is key, he said. "When something doesn't work, parties need to pivot quickly. This year, we didn't see many parties doing so."

Grace Ho